Research Article

PROMOTIONAL AND NON-STEREOTYPICAL POLICING ROLES: ARE WOMEN OPTING OUT?

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There is an appearance that women are uninterested in applying for positions in specialist areas of policing such as tactical operations, traffic and highway patrol, and counterterrorism. It cannot be assumed however that the low numbers of women is indicative of a lack of interest or will to be involved in these areas as there may be unidentified structural impediments preventing them from gaining access to these jobs. This paper critically discusses the issues relevant to women's involvement in specialist policing roles and what can be done by police leaders to encourage greater employment of women in specialist policing roles.

Key Words: policing, police women, specialist policing, gender, police leadership

INTRODUCTION

Policing has been a traditionally male dominated profession and for many years women have been under represented and marginalised. While the overall representation of women in paid employment averages around 46% in most western countries, the level of female representation in policing still does not come anywhere near that figure (Prenzler & Fleming, 2011; Rabe-Hemp, 2007; Westmarland, 2001; Prokos & Padavic, 2002). This picture is slowly evolving as can be seen in the changing statistics for women's employment in policing. In the United Kingdom in 1998, police women made up only 16% of the total sworn police constable population (Westmarland, 2001). This grew to 27.3% in 2013 (Home Office, 2013).

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In Australia, the number of women represented in sworn police positions grew by a similar amount during this same period. In 1996, 13.5% of Australian police officers were women (Wilkinson & Froyland, 1996; Boni, 2005) but by 2006, this number had increased to 23% (Prenzler & Fleming, 2011; Irving, 2009). Studies show that men and women join the police force for similar reasons (Christie, 1996; Brown, 1998) but where men take advantage of opportunities to move into promotional and specialist roles women do not.

In 2013 in the United Kingdom, women in senior ranks across England and Wales still only accounted for 18% of the total police workforce compared with 29.7 of women at the constable level (Home Office 2013). This paper examines gender representation in promotional and specialist roles in policing and the reasons why women appear to be opting out of these roles. The role of police leadership in encouraging greater female representation in promotional and specialist areas will also be critically discussed.

MOTIVATIONS FOR JOINING THE POLICE FORCE

Before embarking on a discussion of gender choices in promotional and specialist roles, it is worthwhile to firstly consider whether there are any identifiable gender differences in motivations for joining the police force. In a study conducted by Christie (1996) involving new recruits in the Queensland Police Service in the early 1990s, no significant difference was found in the reasons given by both men and women for joining the police force.

This study found that helping people, job security, a desire to fight crime and a lack of other job opportunities were the dominant reasons given for becoming a police officer. A study of New York police officers, conducted by Ermer (1978) found that job security, career prospects and relatively high salaries were the main motivating factors for both men and women in making the decision to join the police force. This finding is well supported by other research (White, 2007, Wimshurst, 1995). In the Ermer study, high salary was rated particularly highly by female officers.

It is evident that police recruits in contemporary society are commonly listing economic benefits, job security, career prospects and excitement of the job as the main motivating factors for joining the police (Wells& Alt, 2005) and in reference to these factors, there appears to be commonality between the motivations of men and women (White, 2007, Brown & Heidensohn, 2000).

EXPERIENCE OF GENDER IN POLICING

It has been reported that four in ten police women in England and Wales have considered quitting the police force due to lack of opportunities for flexible working conditions and a belief held by women that the police force is unresponsive to women's needs in regard to pregnancy and maternity leave (Helm, 2012). In addition to this, police women constantly need to prove themselves capable of doing the job in order to gain acceptance into the group and are often marginalised and criticised because of their gender (Rabe-Hemp, 2007).

Dick and Cassell (2004) present an alternative view that policewomen are often their own worst enemy because they consent to dominant and oppressive male constructions of police work and they therefore do not oppose nor seek to change the work practices that marginalise them. Such a view does not take into account the extreme difficulty for policewomen, who are in the minority, to challenge the dominant male culture and to try to introduce change to traditional police practices from a position of relative powerlessness. It must however be taken into account that singling women out for "special" treatment may in fact expose them to greater marginalisation and possibly even hostility and resentment from male colleagues and police unions (Finnane, 2002).

Furthermore, an inherent tension exists for policewomen when trying to establish an identity as a police officer within the police force. Those women who exhibit traditionally feminine behaviours are said to be more readily accepted as a woman by the police group but traditionally masculine behaviours are linked with greater acceptance as a police officer (Prokos & Padavic, 2002). Women who try to retain their feminine identity risk losing the professional confidence of their colleagues but are likely to be socially accepted "as a woman" by the work group.

Women who adopt more masculine behaviours may gain greater acceptance in their work role but risk losing social acceptance in the work group. So much has changed for women in policing but the prevailing police culture remains overtly masculine in nature and as a result women experience difficulties on many levels when trying to fit in (Rabe-Hemp, 2007). To begin with, police women are found in much lower numbers than their male counterparts and are therefore often isolated and viewed with suspicion. In the past police women were resented for "taking a position away from a man" who

(allegedly) could do the job better (Silvestri, 2003). Arguably, while women are more accepted in general policing roles this resentment is still apparent in terms of women's movement into specialist and promotional policing roles (Rabe-Hemp, 2007).

Since policing fosters a culture of hegemonic masculinities it also serves to marginalise femininities and instead encourages subordinated, feminised, masculinity in women (Rabe-Hemp, 2007; Silvestri, 2003). The police culture tends to encourage and celebrate the stereotypical, masculine values of:

- Aggressive, physical activity;
- Competitiveness;
- Preoccupation with imagery of conflict;
- Exaggerated heterosexual orientations;
- Misogynistic and paternalistic attitudes towards women;
- Rigid in-groups with exclusionary sanctions towards out-groups; and
- Strongly assertive of loyalty and affinity in the in-groups (Silvestri, 2003, p.26).

Such strong and idealised social norms can marginalise some police men as much as they do women. Just as there is heterogeneity in femininities, it is misdirected to assume that masculinities in policing are homogenous when in fact multiple varieties of masculinity are represented. This is not just a reference to homosexual and transgender males, but also to men who do not fit the gendered stereotype of the typical "macho cop." It is from within this androcentric culture that policies and procedures are developed, including selection criteria and recruitment requirements for specialist and promotional positions.

Organisational Impediments and Enablers

Police organisations worldwide are experiencing disparity in respect to gender representation in specialist and promotional police roles (Prenzler & Fleming, 2010; Home Office, 2010). According to Australian research conducted by Irving (2009) women are over represented in community policing and administrative roles and under represented in specialist areas such as major crime, highway patrol, tactictical response, drug squad and water police. Although the overall gender breakdown in the Irving research cohort was 80%

male: 20% female, the percentage of men in these areas averaged 90–97% which greatly exceeded this already disparate gender ratio.

It is possible that masculinised selection criteria for specialist and promotional policing roles may be discouraging for some women and may in fact directly or indirectly discriminate against women. For example, selection processes that emphasise physical strength and agility may block women from entry into policing even though some of the physical tests applied to the selection of new recruits are not reflective of the ability needed to do the job (Lonsway et al, 2002). The Fitzgerald Inquiry in Queensland in the 1990s found that while the service was attracting 25% of applicants that were women, only 5–12% of these applicants were getting through the selection process (Wimshurst, 1995). The Inquiry found that "informal" processes had operated to thwart these women from entering the service. Discriminatory selection processes that target men and exclude women, have been identified as hindering women's entry into policing for a number of years (Scarborough & Collins, 2002).

It is also possible that systemic processes (such as recruitment requirements) and informal processes (such as the role of informal networks) are also working to hold women back from entering specialist and promotional roles once in the police force (Rabe-Hemp, 2007). This contention is supported by a United Kingdom study which found that only 26% of police women had been promoted to ranks above constable after 10 years of service whereas 50% of police men had achieved this (Dick & Metcalfe, 2007).

In addition to the apparent difficulties involved when applying for specialist and promotional roles, police women also face greater challenges than men when appointed to these roles (Rabe-Hemp, 2007). In particular is the social isolation of being potentially the sole woman in a unit of men and the cultural isolation of being ostracised by peers. This marginalises women from the informal networks within policing that are essential to career advancement (Rabe-Hemp, 2007).

It is argued that women have long been prevented from getting the experience they need to successfully apply for promotion because they are inequitably deployed to working in stereotypical areas of policing such as victims, domestic disputes and juveniles (Silvestri, 2003; Gold, 1999; Holdaway & Parker, 1998). It is also possible that due to caring responsibilities that impinge at strategic points in their career, women are not taking advantage of

training opportunities that are necessary to prepare them for promotion because such opportunities often involve spending time away from their family (Boni, Adams & Circelli, 2001).

To justify the low numbers of women in senior and specialist policing roles, the argument has been used by male police that women are physically unsuitable for police work (Dodge, Valcore & Klinger, 2010; Silvestri, 2003). Almost as a means of proving this, women are required to demonstrate excessive displays of strength, physical endurance and stamina that have little bearing on the job they are required to do. These requirements continue to exist despite the fact that studies have shown that physical strength is not predictive of police effectiveness (Lonsway et al, 2003). Furthermore, as police move up the hierarchy and into specialist roles, with the exception of some specific roles such as tactical response, these physical requirements have even less applicability to the job at hand. Nevertheless, excessive physical requirements are imposed in most areas of policing, despite such assessments being heavily biased against women (Dodge et al, 2010; Silvestri, 2003).

ARE WOMEN OPTING OUT?

The low numbers of women in senior positions and non stereotypical specialist roles in policing continues to be a problem (Dodge et al, 2010; Irving, 2009) and it is evident that more information is needed to determine why this is the case. Much of the research and discussion to date has centered around the organisational impediments. An explantion that has not been considered is whether in fact the over-riding reason women are not represented in these areas is because they do not want to be in these roles.

Not suprisingly, this assumption is not supported by research into police career aspirations and gender such as an Australian study undertaken by Wimshurst (1995) which found no significant difference in the career aspirations of male and female recruits towards promotion and specialist policing roles. So, it appears that women want these roles as much as men do but may still be choosing not to pursue them. The question is why?

There is no doubt that the masculinised police culture makes the assimilation and acceptance of women in policing difficult to achieve but change is slowly occurring, in general duties policing at least. Despite this improvement there continues to be cultural barriers and organisational systems that serve to either prevent or deter women from entering senior policing positions and

specialist roles (Dodge et al, 2010). Miller (2012) articulates how the culture and requirements of some specialist areas might put women off from applying even while appearing to encourage them:

> It takes a very strong personality to be a lone woman in a male world when you have male supervisors, male colleagues and the type of work it is—very dependent on strength, the ability to be tactically sound, think on your feet (Miller, 2012, p.1).

Women may be discouraged from applying for positions in areas that appear to be hyper masculinised or which have excessively restrictive entry requirements. Studies show that police women generally believe they have to constantly prove themselves and they believe they must be twice as good as men to gain the same level of recognition and acceptance (White, 1996). When faced with having to prove themselves at an even higher level, women are often put off, perceiving the process to be too difficult for them to achieve and the culture too unwelcoming (Dodge et al, 2010). If women therefore choose not to apply for these positions can it be said that they are voluntarily opting out or is it that the organisational processes and sub cultures are impeding their entry?

In addition to these considerations, women still remain the primary caregivers within the family and this poses serious practical impediments to women being able to take on additional responsibilities at work. The way in which work is organised can support or impede women when it comes to career progression and involvement in specialist roles (Wilkinson & Froyland, 1996) and policing is slow to adapt to the changing social landscape in this regard. The attrition of women from the police force tends to occur in the child bearing age groups and is being attributed to lack of access to flexible working conditions that would support their family responsibilities (Charlesworth & Robertson, 2011).

CONCLUSION

This study has analysed some of the factors that are involved in the under representation of women in non-stereotypical specialist roles such as tactical response and major crime units. One of the factors discussed was the potential role played by the masculinised hegemonic subculture to discourage and actively prevent women from entering them. Some suggest that the subculture within specialist units could serve an important function in increasing the unit's cohesiveness and should therefore not be disturbed (Febbraro & McCann, 2003).

However, in refuting this conception, Dodge et al (2010) use SWAT teams as an example to argue that the hyper-masculinised sub-culture is unnecessary in respect to the cohesion and/or effectiveness of these teams. In fact, they argue that studies into gender and the military have shown that the inclusion of women does not adversely affect unit cohesion or camaraderie. Febrarro & McCann (2003) also point to the military as an example to show that the inclusion of women does not adversely affect unit cohesion, camaraderie or unit effectiveness. This cannot therefore be used as an excuse not to include women in specialist policing areas.

Are women opting out of specialist and promotional policing roles? It appears that the answer to this is not a straight forward yes/no response. Women may be choosing not to apply for these positions and may be excluding themselves from opportunities that would give them a competitive advantage when applying for these positions but it is essential to look behind these decisions. From studies undertaken, it is apparent that the reasons behind these choices reveal that what appears to be an exercise of free will is in fact a response to formal and informal processes that operate to impede and discourage women.

Women are not opting out, but rather, are being pragmatic. Just as policing organisations globally have tackled the assimilation of women into generalist policing roles, so too do they need to focus on the acceptance of women in specialist and promotional positions. Gender equity in specialist and promotional policing roles will occur when the exclusionary culture of these internal specialist units change.

In order to address the under-representation of women in promotional and specialist police positions a strategic effort is required on the part of police executive that involves several different approaches that can work separately or be combined. These strategies include, but are not restricted to:

- Internal policies that encourage the involvement of women in specialist policing roles;
- Mentoring programs aimed at encouraging and supporting police women in leadership;
- Reviewing recruitment procedures and selection requirements to remove items that may bias women, especially where these items are not directly linked to the job (e.g. lifting 35kg weights over a 6ft high fence without

bending the knees as is the case in the dog squad of a police force in Australia);

- Active recruitment and marketing programs such as recruiting young women from high school could raise the numbers of women in policing to a "critical mass" that brings about the needed changes;
- Educating both male and female police at middle management levels, about gender bias and how women can be unintentionally impeded in regard to moving into promotional and specialist roles, will raise awareness and promote local leadership to enable police women to succeed in their career development; and
- The formation and support of police women's organisations that can provide both formal and informal support to women as they progress through their policing career and may go some way toward replacing the informal network that frequently favors men.

By strategically channeling time, resources and energy toward this problem in several complimentary ways, it can be expected that police organisations will be able to increase the numbers of women in promotional policing positions and in specialist roles. It is however clear that police leadership at both the senior and local level is not only influential but is critical in heralding such changes and can be the greatest factor in the success of implementing such a strategy.

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